

Modernits Ulama in East Sumatra: The Intellectual Biography of Sheikh Mahmud Khaiyath (1885–1975)

Samsul Bahri^{1*}, Maafi Husin²

Abstract: This study examines the contributions of Sheikh Mahmud Khaiyath (1885–1975), a modernist scholar from Mecca who played a significant role in the Deli region. The focus of this research encompasses his contributions to education, Islamic preaching, and the independence struggle. Using a historical method that includes heuristics, verification, interpretation, and historiography, the study relies on primary sources such as interviews and historical documents, as well as secondary literature reviews. Max Weber's theory of authority is employed to analyze his influence. The findings indicate that Sheikh Mahmud modernized the Friday sermon by incorporating a blend of Arabic and Malay, prioritized outdoor Eid prayers, and opposed the teachings of Ahmadiyah and Communist ideologies. In the field of education, he led the Sultanate of Serdang's madrasa and preached in the plantations to Muslim Javanese workers. As a freedom fighter, he supported weapons logistics and motivated local troops. This research fills a historiographical gap in modernist scholars, highlighting Sheikh Mahmud's courage in balancing tradition with modernity.

Keywords: ulama, modernist, Arab, Malay, education, Ahmadiyah

Article history: Received: 17 June 2023 | Revised: 10 September 2023 |

Available online: 30 December 2023

¹ Universitas Sumatera Utara, Indonesia. E-mail: samsulrodia@gmail.com

² Universiti Islam Selangor, Malaysia. E-mail: maafihusin@gmail.com

* Corresponding author

Copyright: © 2023. The authors.

Journal of Indonesian Ulama is licensed

under a Creative Commons Attribution- NonCommercial 4.0 International License

Introduction

The Eastern Sumatra Residency¹ area is known as the base for the growth and development of various Malay Sultanates on the island of Sumatra, where the people live according to Malay customs and traditions.² In terms of religion and ethnicity, the Malay community has always been closely associated with Islam, as there are no Malays who are not Muslim. If someone of Malay descent renounces Islam, their status as a Malay would be lost. Therefore, it is not surprising that many prominent scholars have emerged in this region over time.³ One of these areas is Tanah Deli, which is now the city of Medan. A closer examination of its history shows that the development of Islamic scholars did not solely come from the Malay community but also from immigrant ethnic groups, particularly the Mandailing⁴ and Minangkabau.

¹ Anthony Reid, *The Blood of the People: Revolution and the End of Traditional Rule in Northern Sumatra* (Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, 2014).

² Until now, the term Malay has been a topic of long discussion among both the public and antropologists. By Usman Pelly states that those who are called Malay are: (1) Muslim, (2) speak Malay, (3) have Malay culture, (4) live in a Malay area, and (5) claim to be Malay. See: Usman Pelly. *Tak Hilang Melayu di Bumi*. (Medan: Casa Mesra Publisher, 2019), hal. 8.

³ Ja'far Ja'far et al., "Discovering the Legacy of Mandailing Ulama: Education, Intellectuals, and Politics in North Sumatra in the Early 20th Century," *Ulumuna: Journal of Islamic Studies* 26, no. 2 (2022): 296–336; Mhd. Syahnan and Azmi Ahmad, "East Sumatra and South Tapanuli Ulama on Religious Sciences at the Turn of the 20th Century," *Nahrasiyah: Journal of Aceh and Malay Archipelago Heritage* 1, no. 1 SE-Articles (December 2023): 18–38, <https://doi.org/10.47766/nahrasiyah.v1i1.1859>.

⁴ Ja'far Ja'far, "From Mandailing Land to Haramayn: Mandailing Ulama and the Religious Sciences in the Early 20th Century," *Hikmah* 19, no. 2 (2022): 187–201, <https://doi.org/10.53802/hikmah.v19i2.169>; Irfa Walid, Haidar Putra Daulay, and Hasan Asari, "The 20th Century Islamic Education in Mandailing Land: A Study of the Intellectual Legacy of Sheikh Ali Hasan Ahmad Ad-Dary (1915-1998)," *Journal of Contemporary Islam and Muslim Societies* 7, no. 1 (2023): 152–83, <https://doi.org/10.30821/jcims.v7i1.15088>; Fadhillah Ani Hasibuan, Achiriah, and Solihah Titin Sumanti, "The History of Teh Development Islam by Malim Salawet in Mandailing Natal in 1810-1870 A.D.," *Santhet (Jurnal Sejarah Pendidikan Dan Humaniora)* 8, no. 1 SE- (November 2023): 172–77, <https://doi.org/10.36526/santhet.v8i1.3257>; Abdur-Razzaq Lubis, "Mandailing Islam Across Borders," *Taiwan Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 2, no. 2 (2005); Zaini Dahlan, "The Intellectual Tradition of Mandailing Ulama in East Sumatra: Zainal Arifin Abbas, 1912-1979,"

These two ethnic groups played a significant role in shaping the religious life of Tanah Deli in the past, despite having different religious orientations. The Mandailing community, in terms of religious understanding, shared similarities with the local Malay community, adhering to the traditional Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah school of thought,⁵ unlike the modernist views promoted by Minangkabau scholars who were members of the Muhammadiyah organization.⁶ These differences sparked serious debates among the communities in the past. However, throughout history, there were points of convergence that united these groups (Malay and Mandailing with Minangkabau), such as their shared efforts to resist the spread of Christianity, which was encouraged by the colonial government, their opposition to the Dutch East Indies government's teacher ordinance policy, and their commitment to educating the younger generation and the Muslim community.⁷

In the course of history, not only the Malay (indigenous) and Mandailing-Minangkabau (immigrant) groups played a religious role, but also immigrant groups from abroad, classified by the Dutch East Indies government as "Eastern Foreigners," such as the Arab community. In Tanah Deli, most of the Arabs came from Hadhramaut.⁸ The Arab community had been settled in Tanah Deli since at least the early 19th century. Sociologically, they faced no significant obstacles in blending into society because they shared the same religious background as the local people. Their acceptance was also supported by their ability to adapt, revive the economy through trade, and, importantly, actively spread Islam.

Journal of Contemporary Islam and Muslim Societies 4, no. 1 (2020): 23, <https://doi.org/10.30821/jcims.v4i1.7025>; Ja'far Ja'far, "Ulama Mandailing Awal Abad Ke-20: Gerakan Religius Dan Politik Abdurrahman Sjihab (1910-1955)," *Islamijah: Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 1, no. 1 (2020); Syah Wardi and Mohd. Yusri bin Jusoh, "Mandailing Ulama in Modern Malaysia: The Intellectual Network and Works of Shaykh 'Abd Al-Qādir Al-Mandīlī," *Nahrsiyah: Journal of Aceh and Malay Archipelago Heritage* 1, no. 1 (2023): 84–105, <https://doi.org/10.47766/nahrsiyah.v1i1.1906>.

⁵ Ja'far Ja'far, "Al Jam'iyatul Washliyah Dan Pelestarian Akidah Ahl Sunnah Wa Al-Jamā'ah Di Indonesia," *Islamica: Jurnal Studi Keislaman* 14, no. 1 (2019).

⁶ Samsul Bahri, *Ulama Mandailing dalam Pentas Sejarah Tanah Deli* (Medan: Prokreatif, 2023), 68.

⁷ Bahri, *Ulama Mandailing dalam Pentas Sejarah Tanah Deli*, 7.

One of the prominent Arab scholars in Tanah Deli was Sheikh Mahmud Khaiyath (1885-1975), who hailed from Mecca⁹ and migrated to Sumatra in 1914 via Kedah, Malaysia. His father, Sheikh Muḥammad bin Yūsuf Khaiyaṭ, was appointed by the Sultan of Kedah as the Sheikh al-Islām (similar to a mufti) in the region. From Kedah, Sheikh Mahmud Khaiyath continued his journey to Tanah Deli. Before settling permanently in Tanah Deli, Sheikh Mahmud Khaiyath had been involved in educational development in Perbaungan, at the request of Tengku Haji Ismail, a nobleman from the Sultanate of Serdang, who had previously visited Sheikh Mahmud Khaiyath's family in Mecca.

In Tanah Deli, Sheikh Mahmud Khaiyath was recognized as a scholar in logic (*manṭiq*) who became active through the Medan Islamic Committee, based at the al-Massawa Mosque (Arab), located in the Kesawan business district. He was a modernist in his religious views, which often led to opposition from traditionalist scholars. His religious thoughts were frequently scrutinized, and he was sometimes seen as a controversial figure. His modernist ideas not only met resistance from traditional scholars but also faced political opposition from the local government. Today, the name Sheikh Mahmud Khaiyath is not widely recognized, despite his significant contributions in Tanah Deli.

This study aims to explore the contributions of Sheikh Mahmud Khaiyath as a modernist scholar who played a crucial role in religious development, education, and the independence struggle in Tanah Deli. Max Weber's theory of authority—traditional, charismatic, and legal-rational¹⁰—is used as a basis for analyzing Sheikh Mahmud Khaiyath's

⁸ Hadhramaut people are called *hadhrim* (in the singular, and *hadhrami* in the plural). The territory covers eastern Yemen, western Oman and southern Saudi Arabia and is the largest province in Yemen, consisting of 28 districts. See: Musa Kazhim Alhabsyi, *Identitas Arab Itu Ilusi: Saya Habib, Saya Indonesia* (Jakarta: Mizan, 2022), 133.

⁹ Mecca is located in the western part of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in the Hijaz, surrounded by mountains around the Kaaba. The lowlands around Mecca are *Batha'*, east of the Grand Mosque is called the *Ma'la* village, while southwest of the Grand Mosque is Misfalah. Rasulullah SAW was a resident of *Ma'la* because he was born and lived there until he moved to Medina. See: Ilyas, Muhammad Abdul Ghani, *Sejarah Mekah Dulu dan Kini* (Makkah: Al-Rasheed Printers, 2004), 17.

¹⁰ Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology* (California: University of California Press, 1978).

influence and legitimacy within society. This research argues that his modernist ideas, such as using Malay in Friday sermons and holding Eid prayers in open fields, demonstrate his courage in confronting traditions deemed irrelevant in the social context of the time. Moreover, his progressive stance on preaching and opposition to Ahmadiyya teachings and Communist ideologies reflect his integrity as a guardian of Islamic beliefs. Therefore, this study fills a historiographical gap concerning modernist scholars in Sumatra, particularly those from the Arab ethnic group.

Methods

This research employs a combination of field research¹¹ and library research.¹² The methodology follows the standard process of historical research, consisting of four stages: heuristics (gathering relevant sources), verification (selecting and validating collected data), interpretation (analyzing and interpreting the data), and historiography (writing the history).¹³ The sources used in this study include both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources for this study include interviews with the family of Sheikh Mahmud Khaiyath. Field observations will also be conducted at the Al-Massawa Mosque (Arab) located on Temenggung Street, Kesawan, Medan Barat District, Medan City. Throughout his life, Sheikh Mahmud Khaiyath was actively involved in the community through this mosque. Additionally, document studies will be conducted on his fatwas and sermons. Secondary sources for this research include existing written works, such as books and journals, deemed relevant to support the research process.

¹¹ Matthew B. Miles, A. Michael Huberman, and Johnny Saldana, *Qualitative Data Analysis: A Methods Sourcebook* (London: Sage Publication, Inc., 2014).

¹² Mestika Zed, *Metode Penelitian Kepustakaan* (Jakarta: Yayasan Pustaka Obor Indonesia, 2018).

¹³ Kuntowijoyo, *Pengantar Ilmu Sejarah* (Medan: Tiara Wacana, 2013).

¹⁴ Haji Abu Bakar Zein Zubaidi (Chairman of BKM Al-Massawa, Kesawan, Medan), interview by Samsul Bahri.

Results and Discussion

The Presence and Role of the Arab Community in Deli Land

The Arab community, which had long migrated to the island of Sumatra, significantly influenced the social life of the Deli region, particularly during the 20th century. Other accounts suggest that they are believed to have arrived in the Deli region around 1765 (18th century).¹⁴ During this period, the Deli region, or the city of Medan, had become a metropolitan area due to rapid economic development. The fame of Deli tobacco, which was highly sought after in the European market, made this region a magnet that attracted people, not only from the indigenous population but also from foreign nations, including Arabs, most of whom hailed from Yemen, specifically Hadhramaut. A small portion of this Arab community also originated from Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Lebanon, or Egypt.¹⁵

Nationally, in 1845, the Dutch East Indies government granted equal status to the group of “Eastern foreigners” (Chinese, Arabs, Indians) and the indigenous population. However, since January 1, 1920, this regulation was amended, and according to the “Indische Staatsregeling,” the population of the Dutch East Indies was divided into groups: Europeans, Eastern foreigners, and indigenous people. This regulation had broad implications, including in terms of settlement areas. It required each group to reside in specific areas designated by the government, and they had to pay a fee if they wished to travel outside these areas, a system known as the “Wijken en Passenstelsel.” This policy led to the establishment of settlement blocks such as Chinatown, Arab Village, and Indian Village, each with its own leader, holding positions such as Kapiten, Letnan, and Wijmeester. The Kapiten was the leader for populations of over 600 people, the Letnan for populations of 300-600 people, and the Wijmeester for populations of fewer than 300 people.¹⁶

The Arab population continued to grow, significantly influencing the ethnic composition of the Malay region. In 1920, demographic data in East Sumatra showed the following ethnic composition: Indonesians

¹⁵ Haji Abu Bakar Zein Zubaidi (Chairman of BKM Al-Massawa, Kesawan, Medan), interview by Samsul Bahri.

¹⁶ Osa Kurniawan Ilham, *Beras untuk India* (Jakarta: PT. Elex Media Komputindo, 2021), 39.

(1,042,930 people), Chinese (134,750 people), Europeans (7,882 people), foreigners from Asia (11,592 people), and Arabs (400 people).¹⁷ Generally, the Arab community was divided into two groups: wulaiti (pure Arabs) and muwallad (Arab descendants). Wulaiti refers to those born in the Arab world and later moved to the Deli region. Some of them were married but did not bring their wives, while others remained bachelors. To integrate with the local population, they married indigenous people, such as from the Malay, Minangkabau, or Mandailing ethnic groups. These marriages resulted in the formation of the second group, the muwallad (Arab descendants). Practically, this also emphasized that all muwallad, being the children of wulaiti, were regarded as “nephews of the indigenous people.”¹⁸ Such marriages signified that the Arab community was more open and did not adopt a segregated (isolated) lifestyle, thus negating the perception of exclusivity.

By demonstrating an ability to adapt and integrate, the Arab community found it easier to play an active role in society, particularly in trade and the spread of Islam. Trade has always been a key identity of the Arabs, whether in classical or modern times. Besides trade, the Arab community also played a vital role in the development of Islamic da‘wah (missionary work) in Deli. One notable figure in this regard is Sheikh Mahmud Khaiyath, a wulaiti Arab who had a significant religious and political influence in Deli during his lifetime.

A Short Biography of Sheikh Mahmud Khaiyath

Sheikh Mahmud Khaiyath was born in Mecca to Sheikh Muhammad bin Yusuf Khaiyath and Jawahir. The exact date of his birth is unknown; however, when he passed away on April 5, 1975, in Medan, he was 90 years old. Therefore, it is estimated that Sheikh Mahmud Khaiyath was born around 1885.¹⁹ His father was an educator in Mecca, and the family ran a madrasa, where most of the students were Malay learners. Due to frequent interactions with Malay students, the family of Sheikh

¹⁷ Usman Pelly. *Urbanisasi dan Adaptasi: Peranan Misi Budaya Minangkabau dan Mandailing di Perkotaan* (Medan: Casa Mesra Publisher, 2017), 69.

¹⁸ Alhabsy, *Identitas Arab Itu Ilusi*, 139.

¹⁹ Nuim Khaiyath (The youngest child of Sheikh Mahmud Khaiyath), interview by Samsul Bahri..

Mahmud Khaiyath learned the Malay language. In fact, several Arabic texts were translated into Malay by him. Sheikh Mahmud Khaiyath received his basic religious education directly from his father, Sheikh Muhammad bin Yusuf Khaiyath, who aspired for him to become a prominent scholar.

Before leaving Mecca, the entire Hijaz region (now Saudi Arabia) was engulfed in political turmoil, coinciding with the outbreak of World War I (1914-1918). The ruler of Hijaz, Sharif Hussein, opposed the Ottoman Empire, which had controlled the region for centuries. Due to the unrest, the Dutch East Indies consulate in Mecca sought assistance from the Dutch government to expedite the repatriation of Hajj pilgrims to the Indonesian archipelago. This process was lengthy, with the aid ship only arriving in Jeddah in 1915, and many of the pilgrims did not find accommodation. The migration of Sheikh Mahmud Khaiyath's family from Mecca in 1914 was influenced by two factors: the political situation in Hijaz and an invitation from Tengku Haji Ismail, a nobleman from the Sultanate of Serdang, for them to come to Sumatra.²⁰

First, the political unrest in Hijaz, as mentioned earlier, attracted the attention of the Ottoman authorities, as well as members of the Ibn Saud dynasty, who began to challenge the Ottoman Empire's rule over Hijaz, particularly its control over the two holy cities of Mecca and Madinah. This led to small-scale resistance movements aiming to liberate Hijaz from Ottoman control. The family of Sheikh Mahmud Khaiyath supported the liberation of Hijaz, which made them targets of Ottoman intelligence and police.²¹

The political dynamics in Hijaz continued after World War I, culminating in the fall of the Ottoman Empire in 1926, which had a profound impact on the region. Hijaz was subsequently annexed by the Ibn Saud dynasty. The fall of the Ottoman Empire and the political changes in Hijaz had significant reverberations in the Islamic world, including in Indonesia, where the Muslim community became polarized. Reformist groups welcomed the arrival of the Ibn Saud dynasty, while

²⁰ Nuim Khaiyath (The youngest child of Sheikh Mahmud Khaiyath), interview by Samsul Bahri.

²¹ Samsul Bahri, *Masjid Al-Massawa: Eksistensi Komunitas Arab di Tanah Deli* (Medan: Prokreatif, 2023), 44.

traditionalist groups expressed concerns about the Wahhabi religious ideology promoted by the new regime.²²

Second, before World War I, Tengku Haji Ismail, a prince of the Sultanate of Serdang, visited Mecca and stayed there for about a year. During his stay, Tengku Haji Ismail became friends with Sheikh Muhammad bin Yusuf Khaiyath. Tengku Haji Ismail witnessed the advancements in the madrasa managed by Sheikh Muhammad's family, prompting him to request that Sheikh Muhammad's family visit the Sultanate of Serdang. He also expressed his desire to establish a madrasa in Perbaungan, the center of the Sultanate of Serdang, and hoped that it would be managed by Sheikh Muhammad's family.

Due to the political instability in the Hijaz, along with an invitation from Tengku Haji Ismail, the family of Sheikh Mahmud Khaiyath ultimately decided to leave their homeland in 1914. Before crossing over to Sumatra, they stopped at the Sultanate of Kedah, which was then ruled by Sultan Abdul Hamid Halim Shah. At that time, Kedah had become an important center for Islamic education in Malaysia. Notable advancements included the development of Malay schools, the establishment of the Government English School in Alor Setar, the expansion of Islamic propagation, and the construction of the Zahir Mosque and Maktab Mahmud.²³

During their stay in Kedah, the family did not encounter significant language barriers, as they were already fluent in Malay from their time in Mecca. Moreover, Sheikh Muhammad bin Yusuf Khaiyath, the father, was appointed as the Sheikhul Islam of the Sultanate of Kedah until his passing, and he was buried in Batu Uban, Kedah.²⁴ One of his students in Mecca was Sheikh Tahir Jalaluddin, a scholar from Minangkabau, who specialized in astronomy (*'ilm al-falak*). Sheikh Tahir Jalaluddin

²² Jajat Burhanuddin, *Islam dalam Arus Sejarah Indonesia* (Jakarta: Kencana, 2017), 425.

²³ Ibrahim Bakar Langkawi, *Naratif Sejarah Kedah* (Kedah: PSM Cawangan Kedah, 2023), 159.

²⁴ The term *Sheikh al-Islām* is also used in the East Sumatra area, precisely in the Sultanate of Serdang which is centered in Perbaungan. In 1932, the position of religious officials was established as Majelis Syar'i at the government level. The Syar'i council is led by a leader with the title *Sheikh al-Islām* whose position and function is broader than that of a mufti (used in the Langkat Sultanate) or Imam

later pursued further studies at al-Azhar University in Egypt. He became an influential scholar in Malaysia, holding the position of a member of the Djawatan Koecasa Orang-Orang Besar and Oelama in the Sultanate of Perak. Additionally, he was appointed by the Sultan of Perak as the examiner for the direction of the qibla of mosques in 1904 and wrote several works on astronomy.²⁵ Due to his expertise in the field of astronomy, Sheikh Muhammad bin Yusuf Khaiyath was once requested to visit Tanah Deli to recalibrate the qibla direction of the Masjid Lama gang Bengkok in Kesawan.²⁶

It was only Sheikh Mahmud Khaiyath who continued the journey to Tanah Deli, while the rest of the family remained in Kedah. He briefly stayed at the house of Encik Ilyas in the Kesawan business district, where the Masjid Lama gang Bengkok stood, and where a religious institution, Maktab Islamiyah Tapanuli (MIT), was later established by the Minangkabau community in 1918.²⁷ Before settling permanently in Tanah Deli, Sheikh Mahmud Khaiyath first fulfilled the request of Tengku Haji Ismail when they met in Mecca. Historically, as a scholar, Sheikh Mahmud Khaiyath played a significant role in Tanah Deli.

First, before fully settling in Tanah Deli, Sheikh Mahmud Khaiyath was actively involved in managing an educational institution in Perbaungan. This madrasah, owned by the Serdang Sultanate family, taught various

Paduka Tuan (used in the Deli Sultanate). Its functions include: coordinating Islamic preaching, setting fasting days – Eid al-Fitr – Eid al-Adha, organizing zakat collection, managing marriage - divorce – referral issues, being responsible for the life of mosque, organizing religious celebrations in the kingdom, coordinating religious education, and lead the Syariah Court. See: Usman Pelly, *Etnisitas dalam Politik Multikultural (Buku II)* (Medan: Casa Mesra Publisher, 2016), 417.

²⁵ Hasanuddin Yusof dan Tun Suzana Tun Othman, *Miftahul Melayu: Sejarah Islam Melayu*. (Negeri Sembilan: Penerbit Alami SDN BHD, 2020), 332.

²⁶ Nuim Khaiyath (The youngest child of Sheikh Mahmud Khaiyath), interview by Samsul Bahri.

²⁷ Muaz Tanjung, *Maktab Islamiyah Tapanuli 1918-1942: Menelusuri Sejarah Pendidikan Islam Awal Abad Ke20 Di Medan* (Medan: IAIN Press, 2012); Hasan Asari and Muaz Tanjung, "History of Maktab Al-Islamiyah Tapanuli," *Heritage of Nusantara: International Journal of Religious Literature and Heritage* 8, no. 2 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.31291/hn.v8i2.559>; A. Akmal Tarigan, N. Nurhayati, and M. Syukri Albani Nasution, "The Network of Ulama and Its Role in The Development of Islam in North Sumatra," *Religio: Jurnal Studi Agama-Agama* 10, no. 2 (2020): 209–26.

religious disciplines. This was also part of fulfilling the request of Tengku Haji Ismail. The cost of living for Sheikh Mahmud Khaiyath was fully covered by the palace. The madrasah he led saw progress as the number of students grew. However, as the demand increased, Sheikh Mahmud Khaiyath found himself overwhelmed and decided to travel to Perak, Malaysia, and Singapore to find additional teachers.²⁸

Second, after about three years in Perbaungan, Sheikh Mahmud Khaiyath decided to leave the administrative center of the Serdang Sultanate. One reason for this decision was his desire for more freedom to expand his *da'wah* (Islamic missionary work). While teaching in Perbaungan, he witnessed the lives of plantation laborers, most of whom were Javanese migrants. The labor migration had surged due to the expansion of plantations in East Sumatra. By 1920, Javanese migrants made up the largest ethnic group in East Sumatra, with 353,557 people, followed by the Sundanese (37,231), Banjarese (17,258), and Minangkabau (15,002).²⁹

Sheikh Mahmud Khaiyath observed the deplorable physical and mental conditions of the Javanese workers. Physically, they were exploited beyond humane limits on the plantations, with low wages and corporal punishment for violations, known as *poenalie sanctie*. Spiritually, while they were Muslims, most of them did not practice Islam properly. Borrowing the term from American anthropologist Clifford Geertz, they could be considered *abangan* Muslims, who were nominally Muslim but far from Islamic teachings.

One phenomenon in the plantations was the growth of gambling, often packaged as *pasar malam* (night markets). Many workers spent their money at gambling tables, accumulating debts by the end of the weekend. In addition to gambling, there were widespread issues with alcohol consumption and fornication. The workers were also plagued by an epidemic of influenza, which became a major cause of death. In 1918, out of 252,439 contract laborers in East Sumatra's plantations, 5,937 died from the epidemic.³⁰

²⁸ Bahri, *Masjid Al-Massawa*, 47.

²⁹ Pelly, *Urbanisasi dan Adaptasi*, 69.

³⁰ Winda Octavia dan Lister Eva Simangunsong, "Sejarah Kesehatan Kuli Kontrak di Perkebunan Deli Maatschappij (1972-1942)," *Jurnal Putri Hijau*, 5, no. 2 (2017), 32.

In response to these conditions, Sheikh Mahmud Khaiyath was determined to spread Islam in the plantations. He carried out his *da'wah* independently, without any sponsors, and had already distanced himself from his role as the manager of the madrasah of the Serdang Sultanate family. He would preach while selling goods, carrying out his *da'wah* voluntarily, out of concern for the Javanese Muslim laborers who were far removed from Islamic teachings. His efforts contradicted the views of Dutch historian Van den Berg, who claimed that Arabs invited to the region to manage mosques were motivated by financial gain rather than by their duty as *da'is* (preachers).³¹

Third, in addition to his work in the plantations, Sheikh Mahmud Khaiyath also engaged in *da'wah* in urban areas. He settled in the Kesawan business district near the Masjid Lama, and in Tanah Deli, he married Encik Thaibah, the granddaughter of Datuk Rustam, the ruler of Datuk Urung Sukapiring, and they had eight children, raised in a blend of Malay and Arabic culture. In Medan, he focused his *da'wah* efforts at the al-Massawa Mosque, which had been under construction since 1889. He was assisted by friends who were former prosecutors during the colonial era, such as Sultan Salim, Abdul Malik, and Raden Marto Supardjo. Previously, the leaders of the Al-Massawa Mosque were Sheikh Ahmad Baafai and Sheikh Mohammad bin Sungkar, who eventually passed the leadership on to Sheikh Mahmud Khaiyath.

Sheikh Mahmud Khaiyath's Role in the Struggle for Independence and Defense of the Faith

Sheikh Mahmud Khaiyath was one of the scholars who adhered to modernist religious views, meaning that not all of his religious opinions were accepted by the traditional scholars in the Deli region. One such instance occurred when he pioneered the use of the Indonesian language for Friday and Eid sermons, except for the obligatory parts of the *khutbah*. Many scholars opposed this, deeming the Friday prayers led by Sheikh Mahmud Khaiyath as invalid.³² His preaching activities

³¹ L.W.C. Van den Berg, *Orang Arab di Nusantara* (Jakarta: Komunitas Bambu, 2010), 113.

³² This is based on the opinion: "Is it implied to deliver the sermon in Arabic? In this health issue, there are two opinions in the Syafi'i school of thought,

were centered at Al-Massawa Mosque, known as the Arab Mosque. Up until that time, all mosques in Deli had khatibs delivering sermons entirely in Arabic, which were not necessarily understood by the congregation, and perhaps even by the khatib themselves, who often read from pre-written Arabic texts.

In Sheikh Mahmud Khaiyath's view, a khutbah was not merely a ceremonial component of Friday or Eid prayers but should contain elements of advice from which the congregation could derive wisdom. If delivered entirely in Arabic, a language most of the congregation did not understand, such advice would likely be considered futile. This stance on religious practice met with strong opposition from traditional scholars in the Deli region. His actions sparked considerable controversy, and some even accused him of spreading a new ideology within Islam.³³

Sheikh Mahmud Khaiyath also initiated the practice of holding Eid prayers in open fields to enhance the visibility of Islam within the community. However, this also faced resistance, especially from the local government, which viewed his actions as a challenge to their authority, prompting him to engage with security forces. Traditionally, Eid prayers in Deli had been held in mosques. To further affirm his modernist stance, in the 1930s, Sheikh Mahmud Khaiyath agreed to serve as an advisor to the Muhammadiyah organization in East Sumatra.³⁴

Sheikh Mahmud Khaiyath also mediated a dispute at the Old Mosque regarding the validity of prayers in a mosque funded by a non-Muslim. This mosque had received substantial financial assistance from Tjong A Fie, a Chinese plantation tycoon who was not Muslim, leading some to question the validity of prayers there. During a debate on the issue, Sheikh Mahmud Khaiyath, leveraging his expertise in logic (*manṭiq*), posed the following argument: "Who here has performed the Hajj?" Some attendees raised their hands. He then asked, "What

the most correct according to *Jumhur* is that it is implied to be in Arabic because this is the same thing as *dhikr* is the performance of *fardhu* prayers such as *tasyahud*, *takbiratul ihram*, as *Rasulullah SAW* said: pray as I pray, so the Friday sermon must be delivered in Arabic". See: Muhyiddin, Imam bin Syaraf al-Nawawi (2004). *Majmu' Syarah al-Muhazzah*. Beirut: Dar al-Fikr, 2004, 521.

³³ Bahri, *Masjid Al-Massawa*, 52.

³⁴ Hamka, *Kenang-Kenangan Hidup* (Jakarta: Gema Insani Press, 2018), 327.

vessel did you use to travel there? Surely, it was a Dutch ship.” He proceeded, “Are the Dutch Muslims?” The response was “No.” He concluded, “If that is the case, your pilgrimage is invalid, as you traveled on a ship owned by the Dutch, who are infidels.” This response stunned the debate participants, and from that, they concluded that Sheikh Mahmud Khaiyath was a scholar who permitted prayers in mosques funded by non-Muslims.³⁵

When Japan’s occupation ended in Medan in 1945, the Allies, backed by the Dutch and their NICA forces, arrived to reclaim control of the city. Despite being of Arab descent and having been born and raised in Mecca, Sheikh Mahmud Khaiyath felt a moral responsibility for Indonesia’s independence in Medan. In his sermons, he consistently urged the guerrilla fighters to maintain their resistance to colonial powers. He issued a fatwa declaring that anyone who died in such a struggle would be considered a martyr and warned against individuals seeking to keep the Dutch presence in Medan.

Sheikh Mahmud Khaiyath was an excellent orator, capable of winning the hearts of Allied recruits from India, many of whom were Muslims. Upon arriving in Medan, these soldiers were shocked to discover that they were fighting fellow Muslims. Many of them, frustrated with the British (who also controlled their homeland, India), defected. Sheikh Mahmud Khaiyath hid these defectors in his home on Masjid Street, particularly during the second police action in 1948.³⁶ Reports from the Allied forces in Sumatra and Java revealed widespread defections, and in Medan alone, 71 Indian soldiers deserted with grenades, Sten guns, and Lee Enfield rifles.³⁷ Two soldiers, Kamaruzzaman and Abdul Hamid, were among those hidden by Sheikh Mahmud Khaiyath before being sent to the guerrilla front.³⁸ These defectors were later organized into the International Volunteers Brigade, led by Abdul Matin and Ghulam Ali.

³⁵ Nuim Khaiyath (The youngest child of Sheikh Mahmud Khaiyath), interview by Samsul Bahri.

³⁶ Bahri, *Masjid Al-Massawa*, 59.

³⁷ Ilham, *Beras untuk India*, 13.

³⁸ Nuim Khaiyath (The youngest child of Sheikh Mahmud Khaiyath), interview by Samsul Bahri.

Additionally, Sheikh Mahmud Khaiyath played a key role in supplying weapons to the independence fighters. He instructed his son, Abdul Fattah Khaiyath, to smuggle gum and other commodities to be sold in Singapore. Proficient in English, Arabic, Dutch, and Japanese, Abdul Fattah was able to establish communication with foreign entities. The profits from these transactions were used to purchase weapons for the fighters in Medan, with the arms stored in Sheikh Mahmud Khaiyath's home in Kesawan before distribution.³⁹

Another significant contribution of Sheikh Mahmud Khaiyath was his commitment to preserving the Islamic faith. In the 1930s, the Ahmadiyya movement, founded by Mirza Ghulam Ahmad in India, gained followers in the Deli region and parts of East Sumatra. This group claimed that after Prophet Muhammad, there was another prophet—Mirza Ghulam Ahmad himself.⁴⁰ In Medan, the movement was propagated by Siddik from India and Abu Bakar from Minangkabau.⁴¹ This led to widespread unease in the community as the teachings were seen as heretical. To address this, Sheikh Mahmud Khaiyath and 25 other scholars convened to discuss the matter. They concluded that the Ahmadiyya Qadiyani movement was misguided and should be rejected by Muslims.⁴²

Similarly, during the Old Order, when Communist ideologies were spreading in Medan, Sheikh Mahmud Khaiyath spoke out against these beliefs, which promoted atheism and rejected the existence of God. In his sermons, he warned the public of the dangers posed by Communist ideas, particularly those advocated by members of the PKI (Indonesian Communist Party). His outspoken criticism of President

³⁹ Nuim Khaiyath (The youngest child of Sheikh Mahmud Khaiyath), interview by Samsul Bahri.

⁴⁰ AN Burhani, "Hating the Ahmadiyya: The Place of 'Heretics' in Contemporary Indonesian Muslim Society," *Cont Islam* 8 (2014): 133–152, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11562-014-0295-x>; Ahmad Najib Burhani, "Lakum Dīnukum Wa-Liya Dīnī: The Muhammadiyah's Stance Towards Interfaith Relations," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 22, no. 3 (2011): 329–42, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09596410.2011.586512>.

⁴¹ Majelis Ulama Sumatera Utara. *Sejarah Ulama-Ulama Terkemuka di Sumatera Utara* (Medan: IAIN Al-Jami'ah Sumatera Utara, 1983), 146.

⁴² Ja'far Ja'far et al., "Anti-Ahmadiyya Rulings in East Sumatra: An Epistemological Review of Religious Opinion in Pre-Independence Indonesia," *Teosofi: Jurnal Tasawuf Dan Pemikiran Islam* 14, no. 2 (2024): 53–93, <https://doi.org/10.15642/teosofi.2024.14.2.53-93>.

Sukarno's policies, especially the NASAKOM (Nationalism, Religion, and Communism) concept, was also a source of tension.⁴³ Sheikh Mahmud Khaiyath questioned Sukarno's commitment to the principle of *Jas Merah* (Never Forget History), citing the Communist uprisings of 1926 and 1948 and asking why Communists were allowed to participate in the 1955 elections despite their history of treason.⁴⁴

Even during the New Order era under President Soeharto, Sheikh Mahmud Khaiyath continued to critique the government, asserting that its policies were not fully aligned with Pancasila, the state ideology. Throughout both the Old and New Orders, his preaching remained a focus of attention for the security authorities.

From Max Weber's perspective, traditional authority is based on belief in the sanctity of age-old traditions and the legitimacy of inherited power. For Sheikh Mahmud Khaiyath, his authority as an Islamic scholar stemmed from his strong family educational traditions. He received religious education from his father, Sheikh Muhammad bin Yusuf Khaiyath, a prominent educator in Mecca, and his family's connections to the Malay community in Mecca bolstered their role in spreading Islamic education. His legitimacy as a scholar was respected, especially by the Sultanate of Serdang and Kesawan, where he eventually settled in East Sumatra.

Weber defined charismatic authority as stemming from the extraordinary qualities of an individual, recognized by their followers. Sheikh Mahmud Khaiyath demonstrated charismatic authority through his dedication to preaching, even amidst the economic and social hardships faced by Javanese plantation workers. His selfless preaching, commitment to defending Muslims from exploitation, and his bold initiative to use the Indonesian language for sermons reflected a charismatic leadership that had a profound impact on the community, despite causing controversy among traditional scholars.

Weber also described legal-rational authority as being based on formal rules and norms. In Sheikh Mahmud Khaiyath's case, his legal-rational authority emerged when he became an advisor to the Muhammadiyah organization in East Sumatra. This role reinforced his position within

⁴³ Bahri, *Masjid Al-Massawa*, 62.

⁴⁴ Bahri, *Masjid Al-Massawa*, 63.

the formal structure of the modernist religious organization, which upheld values of reform and rationality in religious practice. His fatwas, such as permitting prayer in mosques built with funds from non-Muslims, reflected logical reasoning and universal norms that supported tolerance and the advancement of Islam in the Deli region.

Conclusion

Sheikh Mahmud Khaiyath (1885–1975) was a key figure in the history of Tanah Deli, or present-day Medan. He played a crucial role in advancing education, Islamic preaching, and the independence movement. Coming from an educational family background in Mecca, he was an expert in the field of education. His most notable contribution to preaching was his dedication to safeguarding the faith of the Muslim community, particularly the Javanese workers in the plantations. With his modernist religious understanding and progressive preaching approach, Sheikh Mahmud Khaiyath often faced opposition from traditionalist scholars in Tanah Deli, and at times, he was considered a controversial figure. He frequently reevaluated the religious practices prevalent in Tanah Deli at that time, such as the Friday sermon and Eid prayers, which were traditionally expected to be delivered entirely in Arabic, even though the congregation often struggled to understand it, and the practice of holding Eid prayers exclusively in mosques rather than in open fields.

Despite his Arab ethnicity and birthplace in Mecca, Sheikh Mahmud Khaiyath was deeply concerned about the independence of Indonesia, especially during the fight to defend the nation's sovereignty. In every preaching session, he included moral messages aimed at encouraging the independence fighters to remain steadfast against the colonial powers attempting to regain control over Tanah Deli. Sheikh Mahmud Khaiyath also contributed to the independence struggle by facilitating the acquisition of weapons for the freedom fighters through his son, Abdul Fattah Khaiyath, who smuggled plantation commodities to Singapore, using the profits to purchase weapons for the fighters. His communication skills were also crucial in persuading Indian recruits in the Allied forces to defect and support the Indonesian fighters. During the Old Order period, Sheikh Mahmud Khaiyath was a staunch opponent of the Communist

ideology propagated by the PKI and rejected the political conception of Bung Karno's NASAKOM.

Sheikh Mahmud Khaiyath embodied three types of authority, as described by Max Weber: traditional, charismatic, and legal-rational. His traditional authority stemmed from his religious education and the influence of the Malay community in Mecca, which earned him respect in the Sultanate of Serdang and Kesawan. Charismatically, he was known for his selfless dedication to preaching, defending plantation workers, and his courage in introducing sermons in the Malay language, despite causing controversy. His legal-rational authority was demonstrated in his role as an advisor to Muhammadiyah, supporting reform through progressive fatwas, such as allowing prayers to be held in mosques constructed with the help of non-Muslims, which reflected logical thinking and tolerance.

References

- Akmal Tarigan, A., N. Nurhayati, and M. Syukri Albani Nasution. "The Network of Ulama and Its Role in The Development of Islam in North Sumatra." *Religio: Jurnal Studi Agama-Agama* 10, no. 2 (2020): 209–26.
- Asari, Hasan, and Muaz Tanjung. "History of Maktab Al-Islamiyah Tapanuli." *Heritage of Nusantara: International Journal of Religious Literature and Heritage* 8, no. 2 (2019). <https://doi.org/10.31291/hn.v8i2.559>.
- Bahri, Samsul. *Masjid Al-Massawa: Eksistensi Komunitas Arab di Tanah Deli*. Medan: Prokreatif, 2023.
- . *Ulama Mandailing dalam Pentas Sejarah Tanah Deli*. Medan: Prokreatif, 2023.
- . *Ulama Minangkabau di Pentas Sejarah Tanah Deli*. Medan: Prokreatif, 2024.
- Bakar, Ibrahim Langkawi. *Naratif Sejarah Kedah*. Kedah: PSM Cawangan Kedah, 2023.
- Burhanuddin, Jajat. *Islam dalam Arus Sejarah Indonesia*. Jakarta: Kencana, 2017.

Burhani, A N. "Hating the Ahmadiyya: The Place of 'Heretics' in Contemporary Indonesian Muslim Society." *Cont Islam* 8 (2014): 133–152. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11562-014-0295-x>.

Burhani, Ahmad Najib. "Lakum Dīnukum Wa-Liya Dīnī: The Muhammadiyah's Stance Towards Interfaith Relations." *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 22, no. 3 (2011): 329–42. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09596410.2011.586512>.

Dahlan, Zaini. "The Intellectual Tradition of Mandailing Ulama in East Sumatra: Zainal Arifin Abbas, 1912-1979." *Journal of Contemporary Islam and Muslim Societies* 4, no. 1 (2020): 23. <https://doi.org/10.30821/jcims.v4i1.7025>.

Hasibuan, Fadhillah Ani, Achiriah, and Solihah Titin Sumanti. "The History of Teh Development Islam by Malim Salawet in Mandailing Natal in 1810-1870 A.D." *Santhet (Jurnal Sejarah Pendidikan Dan Humaniora)* 8, no. 1 SE- (November 2023): 172–77. <https://doi.org/10.36526/santhet.v8i1.3257>.

Hamka. *Kenang-Kenangan Hidup*. Jakarta: Gema Insani Press, 2018.

Ilyas, Muhammad Abdul Ghani. *Sejarah Mekah Dulu dan Kini*. Makkah: Al-Rasheed Printers, 2004.

Ja'far, Ja'far. "Al Jam'iyatul Washliyah Dan Pelestarian Akidah Ahl Sunnah Wa Al-Jamâ'ah Di Indonesia." *Islamica: Jurnal Studi Keislaman* 14, no. 1 (2019).

———. "From Mandailing Land to Haramayn: Mandailing Ulama and the Religious Sciences in the Early 20th Century." *Hikmah* 19, no. 2 (2022): 187–201. <https://doi.org/10.53802/hikmah.v19i2.169>.

———. "Ulama Mandailing Awal Abad Ke-20: Gerakan Religius Dan Politik Abdurrahman Sjihab (1910-1955)." *Islamijah: Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 1, no. 1 (2020).

Ja'far, Ja'far, Umar Muhammad Noor, Asrul Asrul, and Harun Al Rasyid. "Anti-Ahmadiyya Rulings in East Sumatra: An Epistemological Review of Religious Opinion in Pre-Independence Indonesia." *Teosofi: Jurnal Tasawuf Dan Pemikiran Islam* 14, no. 2 (2024): 53–93. <https://doi.org/10.15642/teosofi.2024.14.2.53-93>.

- Ja'far, Ja'far, Mhd Syahnan, Asrul Asrul, Zaini Dahlan, and Sakti Ritonga. "Discovering the Legacy of Mandailing Ulama: Education, Intellectuals, and Politics in North Sumatra in the Early 20th Century." *Ulumuna: Journal of Islamic Studies* 26, no. 2 (2022): 296–336.
- Kazhim, Musa Alhabsy. *Identitas Arab itu Ilusi: Saya Habib, Saya Indonesia*. Jakarta: Mizan, 2022.
- Khaiyath, Nuim (the youngest son of Sheikh Mahmud Khaiyath, a former journalist at Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), currently residing in Melbourne, Australia, age 86). Interview by Samsul Bahri.
- Kurniawan, Osa Ilham. *Beras untuk India*. Jakarta: PT Elex Media Komputindo, n.d.
- Kuntowijoyo. *Pengantar Ilmu Sejarah*. Medan: Tiara Wacana, 2013.
- Lubis, Abdur-Razzaq. "Mandailing Islam Across Borders." *Taiwan Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 2, no. 2 (2005).
- Miles, Matthew B., A. Michael Huberman, and Johnny Saldana. *Qualitative Data Analysis: A Methods Sourcebook*. London: Sage Publication, Inc., 2014.
- Muhy al-Dīn, Imām bin Syaraf al-Nawawī. *Majmu' Syarḥ al-Muhazzab*. Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 2004.
- Octavia, Winda, dan Lister Eva Simangunsong. "Sejarah Kesehatan Kuli Kontrak di Perkebunan Deli Maatschappij (1972-1942)." *Jurnal Putri Hijau*, Vol. 5, No. 2, 2017.
- Pelly, Usman. *Etnisitas dalam Politik Multikultural (Buku II)*. Medan: Casa Mesra Publisher, 2016.
- . *Urbanisasi dan Adaptasi: Peranan Misi Budaya Minangkabau dan Mandailing di Perkotaan*. Medan: Casa Mesra Publisher, 2017.
- . *Tak Hilang Melayu di Bumi*. Medan: Casa Mesra Publisher, 2019.
- Reid, Anthony. *The Blood of the People: Revolution and the End of Traditional Rule in Northern Sumatra*. Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, 2014.

- Syahnan, Mhd., and Azmi Ahmad. "East Sumatra and South Tapanuli Ulama on Religious Sciences at the Turn of the 20th Century." *Nahrasiyah: Journal of Aceh and Malay Archipelago Heritage* 1, no. 1 SE-Articles (December 2023): 18–38. <https://doi.org/10.47766/nahrasiyah.v1i1.1859>.
- Tanjung, Muaz. *Maktab Islamiyah Tapanuli 1918-1942: Menelusuri Sejarah Pendidikan Islam Awal Abad Ke20 Di Medan*. Medan: IAIN Press, 2012.
- Van den Berg, L.W.C. *Orang Arab di Nusantara*. Jakarta: Komunitas Bambu, 2010.
- Waldi, Irfa, Haidar Putra Daulay, and Hasan Asari. "The 20th Century Islamic Education in Mandailing Land: A Study of the Intellectual Legacy of Sheikh Ali Hasan Ahmad Ad-Dary (1915-1998)." *Journal of Contemporary Islam and Muslim Societies* 7, no. 1 (2023): 152–83. <https://doi.org/10.30821/jcims.v7i1.15088>.
- Wardi, Syah, and Mohd. Yusri bin Jusoh. "Mandailing Ulama in Modern Malaysia: The Intellectual Network and Works of Shaykh ‘Abd Al-Qâdir Al-Mandîlî." *Nahrasiyah: Journal of Aceh and Malay Archipelago Heritage* 1, no. 1 (2023): 84–105. <https://doi.org/10.47766/nahrasiyah.v1i1.1906>.
- Weber, Max. *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*. California: University of California Press, 1978.
- Yusof, Hasanuddin, dan Tun Suzana Tun Othman. *Miftahul Melayu: Sejarah Islam Melayu*. Negeri Sembilan: Penerbit Alami SDN BHD, 2020.
- Zed, Mestika. *Metode Penelitian Kepustakaan*. Jakarta: Yayasan Pustaka Obor Indonesia, 2018.
- Zubaidi, H. Abu Bakar Zein (an Arab community leader in Medan, Chairman of BKM Al-Massawa (Arab Mosque), age 73). Interview by Samsul Bahri.